

Waiting for Meds at 3am

Jack Vian

My patient speaks from the dark,
The hall light filtering
Through the aerating water reservoir.
Translucent clouds bubble dance
Across the stone heart of his face.

I thought he'd fallen back to sleep,
His one eye screwed tight, the other
A narrow slit watching
Like a mail slot waiting for anthrax.

"You know it was Vietnam
That fucked me up.
I never knew it until last night.
Talking to Sampson I realized I never let go of Vietnam.

Whenever there was a firefight
And the VC were shooting at us
I'd get behind a tree.
You know what I was doing there?"

-Hiding?
-Praying?
-Shitting like Richard Pryor?
-I don't know, I think

Afraid to swear.

"I was getting my rig out.
Tying off.
Shooting heroin."
He paused
And I thought he might be

Expecting an answer.
But then he said,
"I didn't do drugs before Vietnam.
Not heroin." And his good eye glazed
In wistful alliance to his arching brow.

"The heroin was fucking good there
That's where they make it.
But I felt a lot of guilt.
I was strung out.
I wanted someone to shoot me.

"That's why I pulled those robberies.
I never put bullets in my gun.
I was trying to get shot.
I was trying to die."

He said it like a great truth.
Like he was Job in olive drab,
Trading his rifle for a rig, his camou
For prison whites, his brogans
For a hospice bed.

I thought: Your first time down

You got the death penalty commuted
To life for trying to rob that liquor
Store and shooting the owner
In the leg. That was 1968.

Then you killed Dead Man.
Shot him in the back of the head
And got away with it even though
You almost killed his son
When you both did time on Ellis I.

You were a heroin addict
With a robbery problem.
Only 14 months on the streets
Between catching lifes.
That's 34 years out of 58.

And last night you were talking about
Doing more robberies and moving dope,
Not praising God and going straight.
Like there's a choice when you can't
Piss without running out of breath.

Now it's guilt. I thundered
Into a silent tongue-bit void.
"Didn't anybody notice?"
"Who?"
"Your CO, the Sgts, the Lt?"

"They knew.
I wasn't the only one.
A lot of GI's were strung out.
But they didn't care.
They left me alone."

His voice was receding like a wave
Into the whispery depths of his lungs
And his eyes closed as if to sleep.
"They knew I could still shoot.
I could always shoot.

"That's all they cared about."

Dedicated to Melchor Longoria Ortega, Jr. He died at 12:44 a.m., October 10, 2003.
I was not at his side.
I don't know if he ever let go.